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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether individuals in higher education who are exposed to a hiring rationale based on a diversity value (minority group differences are valuable and should be relevant criteria for employment decisions in higher education) will rate affirmative action as fairer than those exposed to a compensation rationale (minority status is relevant because such consideration helps restore benefits precluded by past discrimination). A sample of 87 students enrolled at Fairleigh Dickinson University of New Jersey were asked to rate their agreement with a college's hiring rationale and rate candidate qualifications involving a black female candidate (who got the job) and a white female candidate. Students were exposed to either diversity or compensation conditions for the school's final hiring decision. Findings revealed no significant effects for rationale on either the fairness of hiring the black candidate or the college's general policy. Also, the candidate's qualifications had no effect on student ratings of the college's general affirmative action policy; subjects appeared to use information about qualifications to evaluate a specific hiring decision, but not to evaluate the affirmative action policy in general. (GLR)

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Attitudes towards affirmative action: Effects of procedural rationale and candidates' qualifications

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Attitudes towards affirmative action: Effects of procedural rationale and candidates' qualifications

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PROBLEM: Glasser (1988) notes that affirmative action policies present two different rationales for why minority status should be a relevant criterion in employment decisions. According to a compensation rationale, minority status should be considered relevant because such consideration helps restores benefits precluded by past discrimination. In contrast, a cultural diversity rationale argues that minority status should be considered relevant because minority status is a performance criterion. For example, diversity advocates argue that diversity in experiences and interests contribute to the generation of new ideas and insights, and such diversity strengthens an institution. Diversity and compensation aim at similar distributive goals, but diversity additionally portrays minority status as a relevant and positive performance attribute.

In past research, Nacoste (1985) demonstrates that when administrators do not consider performance criteria, beneficiaries of affirmative action deem the process unfair, and presumably, so do observers who are not beneficiaries. Since the weighing of performance qualifications strongly influences attitudes towards affirmative action, we predicted that the more similarity there is in a minority and majority candidate's qualifications, the fairer affirmative action will be rated. In addition, Glasser (1988) notes that under a compensation rationale, many individuals believe that performance qualifications are given insufficient weight. However, when a diversity rationale is emphasized, we suspect that individuals perceive minority status as a relevant performance criterion, and that performance qualifications are given sufficient weight. Therefore, we predict that individuals exposed to a diversity rationale will rate affirmative action as fairer than those exposed to a compensation rationale.

SUBJECTS: Eighty-seven students (46 male, 41 female) enrolled in introductory psychology at Fairleigh Dickinson University participated as part of a class project.

PROCEDURE: A white, male instructor asked students to read and offer their opinions about a faculty hiring decision that reportedly happened at another institution. One version of six hiring scenarios was distributed randomly to each subject. The scenarios varied in a 2 X 3 factorial design an affirmative action rationale (compensation, cultural diversity) and the candidates' qualifications (identical, similar, different). Each scenario first described a college's request to a department to hire an assistant professor, and to fulfill the college's affirmative action policy. The rationale manipulation was then introduced by varying the college's rationale for its policy. In the compensation condition, the scenario explained that the college believes that past legal discrimination impeded many minorities' opportunities, that the residual effects of that discrimination are still felt today, and that the college is committed to righting the imbalance produced

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by past injustice. In the cultural diversity condition, the scenario explained that the college believes that cultural diversity in an academic environment is an essential ingredient for a liberal arts education, and that to ensure diversity in its teaching staff, the college is committed to recruiting and hiring qualified minority faculty.

Following this, the scenario explained that final competition for the position was between a black female (who got the job) and a white female. The qualifications variable was then manipulated by varying the prestige of the candidates' degree-granting institutions, the number of the candidates' publications, and their teaching evaluations. In the identical qualifications condition, both candidates earned their doctoral degrees at the same Ivy League institution, had the same number of publications, and had teaching evaluations that were statistically equal. In the similar qualifications condition, the candidates earned their degrees at different Ivy League institutions, the Black candidate had three publications whereas the white candidate had five, and the white candidate had slightly higher teaching evaluations. In the different qualifications condition, the black candidate earned her degree at a state institution, the white candidate earned her degree at an Ivy League institution, the black candidate had three publications, the white candidate had 15, the black candidate had teaching evaluations slightly above the department average, and the white candidate had teaching evaluations far above the department average. In each qualifications condition, both candidates were described as having strong letters of recommendation, having taught the same introductory courses, and as having research interests in the same general field. Subjects were debriefed following completion of the dependent variables.

DEPENDENT VARIABLES. Manipulation checks for the rationale variable asked subjects to rate (1 = disagreed strongly, 8 = agreed strongly) the extent to which the college's rationale for its affirmative action policy was because the college believes (a) cultural diversity in its teaching staff is essential for a well-rounded education, and (b) action must be taken to compensate for racial injustices committed in the recent past. Manipulation checks for the qualifications variable asked subjects in separate questions to rate the qualifications of the black and white candidate (1 = qualified, 8 = unqualified). Main dependent measures asked subjects to rate the fairness (1 = very fair, 8 = very unfair) of the college's affirmative action policy, and the department's hiring of the black female candidate.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: Manipulation checks revealed that the rationale and qualifications manipulations had their intended impact. Specifically, regarding the rationale variable, subjects agreed that diversity was the college's rationale when they were exposed to the diversity rationale ($M = 5.31$), and disagreed when they were exposed to the compensation rationale ($M = 3.49$), $F(1, 75) = 15.17$, $p < .001$. Likewise, subjects agreed that compensation was the college's rationale when they were exposed to the compensation rationale ($M = 5.22$), and disagreed when they were exposed to the diversity rationale ($M = 3.96$), $F(1, 75) = 5.98$, $p = .017$. Also, regarding the qualifications variable, subjects in the identical condition rated the candidates as equal in qualifications ($M_{difference} = 0.00$), whereas subjects in the similar condition rated the Black candidate as slightly less qualified ($M_{difference} = 0.45$), and subjects in

the different condition rated the Black candidate as significantly more unqualified ($M_{difference}$ = 1.29), $F(2, 75) = 7.25$, $p = .001$.

Analysis of the main dependent measures generally supported the qualifications hypothesis, but did not support the rationale hypothesis. Specifically, regarding the qualifications hypothesis, hiring the Black candidate was rated as (marginally) fairer when the candidates' qualifications were identical (M = 4.93) than when they were similar (M = 6.00) or different (M = 6.19), $F(2, 75) = 2.61$, $p = .08$. However, subjects made no significant distinction when the candidates' qualifications were similar versus different, and qualifications had no effect on ratings of the college's general affirmative action policy, $F(2, 75) = 0.75$, $p = .47$, $M_{identical} = 4.93$, $M_{similar} = 5.52$, $M_{different} = 5.61$. Thus, subjects appeared to use information about qualifications to evaluate a specific hiring decision, but not to evaluate the affirmative action policy in general.

Regarding the rationale hypothesis, analysis revealed no significant effects for rationale on either the fairness of hiring the Black candidate, or the college's general policy. Thus, subjects rated the hiring as slightly, but not reliably, more unfair in the compensation condition (M = 6.04) than in the diversity condition (M = 5.41), $F(1, 75) = 1.10$, $p = 30$, and rated the college's general policy as slightly, but not reliably, more unfair in the compensation condition (M = 5.47) than in the diversity condition (M = 5.26), $F(1,75) = 0.10$, $p = .76$. In contrast to these null effects, however, an internal, correlational analysis revealed a reliable correlation consistent with the theory underlying the rationale prediction. Specifically, subjects' perception that diversity was the college's rationale was significantly and negatively correlated with the perceived unfairness of the college's affirmative action policy, $r_{2\text{-tail}}(87) = -.21$, $p = .05$, and the hiring of the Black candidate, $r_{2\text{-tail}}(87) = -.21$, $p = .05$. In other words, regardless of subjects' treatment condition, subjects perceived the college's affirmative action policy and the specific hiring to be fair to the extent that they perceived the college's rationale was diversity. In contrast, there was no significant correlation between the belief that compensation was the college's rationale and the perceived unfairness of the college's general affirmative action policy, $r_{2\text{-tail}}(87) = -.04$, $p > .05$, or the specific hiring of the Black candidate, $r_{2\text{-tail}}(87) = -.03$, $p > .05$.

The correlation between perceived diversity and perceived fairness is consistent with the theory underlying the rationale prediction, but as with any correlational evidence, this evidence does not specify the direction of causality, or the potential that a third variable (e.g., general liberalism) is a causal variable. It may be that the merits of a diversity rationale turn on knowing specific information about the composition of a hiring department, or on knowing specific examples of the diversity that a candidate may bring to an institution. In contrast, evidence concerning candidates' qualifications suggests that when candidates' qualifications are identical, publicity about candidates' comparability may mitigate negative reactions to an affirmative action decision. Given the salience of affirmative action policies in current attitudes towards minority groups (see Pettigrew & Martin, 1985), it will likely be necessary to continue examining conditions so as to better understand reactions to such policies.

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